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Citation for published version:

Fergusson, D 2017, 'In Memoriam: Rev. Professor Duncan Baillie Forrester (1933–2016)', *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 475-479. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0953946817722936>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1177/0953946817722936](https://doi.org/10.1177/0953946817722936)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Studies in Christian Ethics

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In Memoriam: Rev Professor Duncan Baillie Forrester (1933–2016)

Duncan Forrester, Professor of Christian Ethics and Practical Theology in the University of Edinburgh (1978–2000), died on 29 November, 2016 aged 83. An academic theologian, university leader and minister of the Church of Scotland, he established the first Centre for Theology and Public Issues in 1984, an inter-disciplinary think-tank that sought to bring theological insights to bear upon a range of political and social challenges. Leading the Centre until his retirement, he pioneered work in public theology across the world. Today an international network connects twenty-four such centres around the world. His own writings were largely dedicated to the study of Christian worship and political theology, themes that were inextricably linked for him both personally and professionally.

Born on 10 November 1933, Duncan grew up in St Andrews, the youngest of five siblings, where his father, Professor William Forrester, held the Chair of Practical Theology and Practical Theology. His mother, Isobel Stewart, was a noted ecumenist within the national Kirk. A cousin to the leading Scottish theologians John and Donald Baillie, she had been an Oxford undergraduate prior to the First World War. Educated in politics and theology in St Andrews, Chicago, and Edinburgh, Duncan Forrester proceeded to chart his own course, by combining a commitment to social justice with a strong ecumenical theology. His interest in the study of Christian worship and social ethics was formed at an early stage and endured through a distinguished career in India, Sussex and Edinburgh.

At Madras Christian College from 1962, he taught politics and was ordained in the life of the Church of South India. During this time, he married Margaret McDonald, who shared his lifelong concern for the local and international church. Returning to the UK in 1970, Duncan served as chaplain and lecturer in the School of African and Asian Studies at Sussex University where he completed his DPhil thesis. Following the untimely death of Jim Blackie, he was appointed in 1978 to the Chair of Christian Ethics and Practical Theology at New College in Edinburgh. Without much experience of parish ministry or the teaching of theology, his appointment aroused some scepticism. But this was quickly dispelled by the energy and vision that he brought to the task over the next twenty years. As professor and head of department, he established Edinburgh as the leading centre for practical theology in the UK. His initial partnership with Alastair Campbell and Robin Gill, before they left for chairs elsewhere, was to prove crucial in this respect, as were later alliances with colleagues such as Ian McDonald, David Lyall, Michael Northcott, Jolyon Mitchell and Marcella Althaus-Reid.

The Centre for Theology and Public Issues (CTPI) brought together representatives of different churches and scholars from across the academy. Tackling issues on poverty, social justice, and nuclear disarmament, the Centre inevitably attracted criticism for promoting a centre-left agenda, particularly during the Thatcher years. Undeterred by such criticism, Duncan never apologized for his faith or his politics, firmly believing that he and his colleagues had a responsibility to speak for those at the sharp end of government policy. In any case, CTPI was to prove unpredictable in tackling neglected themes such as prison reform, suicide rates amongst young men, and violence against women in Scotland. Much of this work was informed by his repeated conviction that one should not talk about people

behind their backs. Having worked in industrial Clydeside and Sheffield during his student years in the 1950s, he resolved never to remain confined to the narrow sphere of suburban or university life. This was later reflected both in direct engagement with prisoners, industrialists, farmers, the unemployed, and the homeless in his CTPI forums, and also in his exhorting students to become involved in the wider life of the city, particularly in areas of urban deprivation adjacent to the university.

Despite his anxieties around the marketisation of higher education, Duncan could prove remarkably adept at recognising opportunities for academic innovation and enhancing the strengths of New College. He generated substantial sums of research income, expanded his departmental base and was instrumental in attracting funds for Masters programmes in theology and development, and in theology and media studies. He was less than impressed when one of his colleagues described him as an 'academic tycoon', but this was surely a back-handed tribute to his formidable skills. Later serving as both Dean of the Faculty and Principal of New College, he exercised a strong pastoral sense in his dealings with colleagues and students. Though often unnoticed, his personal commitment to ordinands was always paramount. He would devote large swathes of time introducing them to the ecumenical breadth of the church in its liturgical and missional expressions. In welcoming students from around the world into their home, Duncan and Margaret exhibited an unflagging hospitality. A team player as well as a leader, he worked successfully with a range of co-editors, particularly in his work on the history and theology of worship in Scotland.¹ Much of this work brought together historians, systematicians and practical theologians at a time when the study of Scotland's religious life was in danger of eclipse. One of his last publications was an accessible introduction to patterns of worship which has proved useful for adult Christian education.²

Most of Duncan's academic output reflected an integration of themes and interests in Christian worship, ethics, and political theology. Influenced by the stress on Christian distinctiveness pursued by writers such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas in the USA through the 1980s, he argued that the prophetic witness of the church requires to be social and political but rooted in the practices and habits of Christian congregations. This resonated with his conviction that a worshipping community could generate important personal, intellectual and moral resources for social transformation. The ministry of his wife (to whom so much of his work is dedicated) in the inner city parish of St Michael's, with areas of multiple deprivation, was influential, as were MacIntyre's Edinburgh Gifford Lectures in 1988.³ These influences were especially apparent in the published version of his

¹ For example, Duncan B. Forrester and Douglas M. Murray (eds.), *Studies in the History of Worship in Scotland* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), Duncan B. Forrester, James I. H. McDonald and Gian Tellini, *Encounter with God: An Introduction to Christian Worship and Practice* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), Duncan B. Forrester and Doug Gay (eds.), *Worship and Liturgy in Context: Studies and Case Studies in Theology and Practice* (London: SCM, 2009).

² Duncan B. Forrester, *Living and Loving the Mystery: Exploring Christian Worship* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 2010).

³ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988). In his closing remarks at the end of his concluding lecture, MacIntyre described Forrester as having been his 'guardian angel and minder' throughout the series.

Henson Lectures (1987–88).⁴ Nevertheless, despite his affinity with these emerging trends in Christian social ethics, Duncan increasingly stressed the importance of conversation across disciplinary and religious boundaries together with the need to accommodate the best insights of the secular world. Perhaps worried by the charge that he might be ‘a sectarian of the left’ or prone to a ‘pre-Constantinian romanticism’⁵, he never lost sight of the need to foster links across the academy and society. The church was far from an ideal community, he insisted, nor did it have a monopoly on moral wisdom.⁶

Author of ten monographs and essay collections, his most creative contribution may be in developing the concept of ‘theological fragments’. Even in the drift towards a post-Christian society, fragments from earlier systems of theology retain an arresting and sometimes discomfiting capacity to generate fresh insight and moral vision.⁷ This was more Stout than MacIntyre. The theologian is likened to a labourer in a quarry who offers up materials that can be used for construction in the wider world. An example he often cited was the language of forgiveness and reconciliation in relation to the rehabilitation of those who had served their time in jail.⁸ Other output revealed his commitment to earlier convictions, perhaps fearing that these were increasingly threatened by the direction of travel in western societies. In much of what he wrote, human equality was defended to a greater extent than political freedom, not because he devalued the latter but through fear of the loss of the former as a legitimate ideal.

Much of Duncan’s output was in essay form. Given his extensive commitments, this is hardly surprising. Writing on a diversity of topics, he would draw upon insights gathered ‘on the road’, often making creative and topical connections that spoke to the issues of his day. As a contextual theologian, he had an unusual breadth of interests which were not fully apparent until a collection of forty such essays appeared in a single volume in 2010.⁹ He had a talent for rapid writing and meeting of regular deadlines. His most substantial monograph was *On Human Worth*. Published in 2001, this work has both a nostalgic and prescient quality. Looking back to the earlier political ideals of Tawney and the post-war welfare state that had been discarded in the Thatcher-Blair years, he lamented the loss of equality as a fundamental moral and political ideal. If this book initially appeared to be out of step with the political culture of the early twenty-first century, it now presents as ahead of its time. Unsettling in its stories, statistics and theological convictions, *On Human Worth: A Christian Vindication of Equality* offers an account of human solidarity and concern for the other that seems irresistible at a time of heightened inequalities. Long in gestation, this work was rooted in Duncan’s own life experience as is evident from its frequent allusions to family,

⁴ Duncan B. Forrester, *Beliefs, Values and Politics: Conviction Politics in a Secular Age* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).

⁵ See James A. Whyte, ‘Church and Society in the Thought of John Baillie’, in David Fergusson (ed.) *Christ, Church and Society: Essays on John Baillie and Donald Baillie* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 235–249.

⁶ ‘[T]his position is defective, precisely because it expresses too narrow an understanding of the Church and too limited an understanding of God’s ability to address and challenge us through the events of the day or the wisdom of the secular world.’ Duncan B. Forrester, *Theological Fragments: Explorations in Unsystematic Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 15.

⁷ The concept of ‘fragments’ already appears in *Theology and Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 167.

⁸ *Theological Fragments*, op. cit., 5.

⁹ Duncan B. Forrester, *Forrester on Christian Ethics and Practical Theology: Collected Writings on Christianity, India, and the Social Order* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

church, worship, and Scripture, all of which underpinned his (unfashionable) conviction that a commitment to equality was religious in origin.

Energy and enthusiasm were words readily associated with Duncan. Cycling, jogging and hill-walking, he maintained a high level of physical fitness. His range of commitments and activities would astonish colleagues. As a speaker, writer and facilitator, he was in high demand for over thirty years. He delivered lecture series in several continents, presided over three scholarly associations, served on the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, and chaired the Theology and Religious Studies sub-committee in the 2001 UK research assessment exercise. He was awarded honorary degrees by the universities of Glasgow, St Andrews and Iceland and elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 2007. He served simultaneously as President of the Society of Christian Ethics (1991–94) and President of the Society for the Study of Theology (1991–93). A Festschrift appeared in his honour in 2004.¹⁰

Though skilled in commanding a public platform, Duncan was never more at home than amongst students as a teacher and doctoral supervisor. Evening seminars were held in his family home – a practice almost unheard of nowadays. Years later, students still recall the conviviality and intellectual stimulus of these occasions. He enjoyed recounting stories of his early teaching experiences, claiming that as a young tutor of political science he had once introduced Malcolm Rifkind and others to the works of Machiavelli! In his final year of teaching, he began by declaring that each year had proved more exciting for him than the one that preceded it. Amongst other gifts, he had an unrivalled capacity to encourage students and younger colleagues to believe in their abilities and to pursue their goals. He would sometimes preside at the evening celebration of the Eucharist in the New College Senate Room. Gesturing towards the portraits on the walls, he would describe the encouragement to be derived from being surrounded by a ‘cloud of witnesses’, whose work remained incomplete ‘apart from us’.

Duncan anticipated a long retirement full of activity and further intellectual pursuits. Sadly, this was not to be. The onset of Parkinson’s disease, even before his retirement, slowed him both physically and mentally. When Margaret fell and broke her hip in 2012, he decided to enter a nearby care home the following year. Visitors became aware of an increasing frailty, though combined with his characteristic determination to enthuse others in whatever path they pursued. Assessments of his work are likely to rank him as one of the leading public theologians of the late-twentieth century who made a decisive contribution to the School of Divinity in Edinburgh. He is survived by his wife, their two children, Donald and Catriona, and their families.

¹⁰ William F. Storrar and Andrew R. Morton (eds.), *Public Theology for the 21st Century* (London: Continuum, 2004).